

**Call for evidence – Open call response**

**What are the main challenges and opportunities for communities, culture and belonging, and how have these changed, or not, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Despite the widespread elite level discussion of the need for a public policy and societal 'rethink' or 'reset', it should not be presumed that public attitudes towards public policy or towards communal bonds have - so far at least - been changed by the experience of the pandemic. Survey work undertaken in July 2020 (and due to be repeated in March 2021) uncovered few areas where the distribution of responses was notably different from that recorded by surveys undertaken before the pandemic. Those who wish to propose changes in the direction of public policy may find themselves having to persuade the public of the need for change rather than presume that citizens have reached the same conclusions as themselves. This finding is not entirely negative. Although there has been much discussion of how coronavirus has 'brought people together', previous academic literature on pandemics and contagious diseases suggests that it can undermine social trust, lead to the othering of minorities, and disapproval of minority practices and behaviours. We have found little support for this proposition so far - but equally no reason to believe that our societal bonds are necessarily any stronger than they were before. Equally, despite the attention that has been given to how coronavirus has served to dramatise some of the inequalities in our society, it is not immediately apparent that levels of support for governmental action to reduce economic inequality have changed markedly in the immediate wake of the pandemic.

**What are the main challenges and opportunities for knowledge, skills and employment, and how have these changed, or not, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

One of the striking features of British public opinion since the late 1990s has been a marked reluctance to spend money on welfare for those of working age (as opposed to the retired). In taking this view the public seem to have taken their cue from the stances adopted both by the New Labour administration of 1997-2010 and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010-15. However, the pandemic has seen the current Conservative government spend significant sums of money on supporting people's existing employment and on uprating welfare benefits for those who are unemployed. The latter group is likely to grow further, and there is likely to be debate about the level of provision that should be made for them until they can find employment. There were already signs in the years immediately before the pandemic of some shift in public opinion back towards the position before 1997, with lower levels of support for spending more on the retired and increased support for spending on the unemployed (albeit still not at the level that was in evidence before 1997). While our latest survey does not suggest that - initially at least - the pandemic has moved public opinion further in that direction, it may still be important to note that at the time that Britain entered the pandemic the public mood had already shifted to being more supportive of provision for those of working age. This may make it easier for policy makers to contemplate some more permanent change in public policy in this area.

**What is not covered above that you think should also be considered?**

Given the centrality of the role of the state in dealing with the pandemic it might be thought pertinent to ask whether COVID19 raises questions about how we are governed. There would seem to be risk that this exercise will consider what government can and should do for society, while failing to ask what government should do about itself. For what it is worth, levels of trust and confidence in government appear to have improved from what they were in 2019 - but they were at record lows in 2019 because of the Brexit stalemate. The recovery, such as it is, largely reflects a turnaround in the views of Leave voters now that Brexit has been delivered - and levels of trust and confidence are still at a relatively low level by historical standards. I am a recipient of ESRC funding and I am willing for you to share my response to this survey with ESRC

**To which of the following policy areas does your evidence relate?**

Health and wellbeing

**To which of the following cross-cutting themes does your research relate?**

Inequalities